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How the K.U. Student Learns English

By Members of the Department of English
University of Kansas

We take it that a common aim of our educational system at all levels is to see that each student gets the training that will make him the best possible communicator, no matter whether he ends his formal education with high school, or goes on to work that will fit him for communicating with larger circles of his fellow beings. Our readers in the high schools and elsewhere can help us, and we can help them, in better fulfilling this aim.

At K.U. this fall there are more than 1300 new freshman faces, a diversity of individuals that would be quite bewildering if we could do no better than think of them as a mass, and treat them as a mass. But we believe we have good means of treating each as an individual, of bringing each into fruitful contact with members of our teaching staff, and of seeing to it that each gets the training in English that will help him to realize his own potentialities—in his studies, in his work, in all his varied associations throughout life, and in the quiet of his private cultural pursuits.

The administrative means by which we try to fulfill these aims for these hundreds fall under three heads: first, the devices by which we determine the kind and amount of training each person should have; second, the courses and other services for his instruction; and third, the program for his professional training if he wants to make himself a teacher of English.

Each Student Is Placed

Every incoming freshman class presents the Department of English with a problem considerably more complex than that faced by most other departments. All new students, regardless of their major interests, are required to take two semesters of freshman English, and almost all are with us for two more semesters in the sophomore year. Our first hurdle is to convince the student that the requirement is a wise one, that training in English is as important to him if he wants to major in physics or engineering as it is if he wants to major in history or English.

Another problem arises from the student's past: before he comes to college he is not likely to have picked up many habits or notions that will cause him trouble in chemistry or architecture or psychology. Nor does his family background have any particular influence on his success in these subjects. He comes to them fresh, with few preconceptions except perhaps the feeling that he is going to be interested in them. With English we just don't have this sort of luck. He has been speaking English for fifteen or sixteen years, and despite the efforts of the teachers he has met along the way, he may still have a number of habits we will want to replace with other ones.

This article has been reprinted from the December, 1952 issue of the *Bulletin of the Kansas Association of Teachers of English* with the kind permission of the Editor, Miss Sarah C. Haller. In order to make circulation of it more complete, we are including it in this issue since the *University of Kansas Bulletin of Education* circulates among all the schools of Kansas.—The Editor.

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To be sure, some students have had the fortune to grow up in homes where Shakespeare, Dickens, and Thackeray are on a convenient shelf in the study. Their parents may have encouraged them to read these books and others. Any student, of course, will have met some good reading in school, but he may come from a background where the main item of literature is the daily newspaper, and where "he don't's" and "ain't's" are as thick as flies. Schools differ, too. One girl may come from a high school where she wrote a theme a week for a conscientious English teacher who read and criticized the papers carefully. Another, not so fortunate, may have been in an English class taught by a person who already had a heavy load in another area and who was forced into the task because there was no one else around to do it. Add to all this the great spread in native endowment, add the disruptive effects on vocabulary and grammar of the radio comedy and the newspaper funnies—and you see what we mean by "a complex problem."

Testing for Placement

The first step in its solution is to place the student in the proper class. At K.U. an entering student takes various tests administered by the University Guidance Bureau during Orientation Week, the week before enrollment begins. Among these tests are a reading test and a comprehensive test in English. Their ultimate aim is to give the student a good start in his college career. If, for instance, he needs extraordinary help in reading he is urged to attend the Reading Clinic—not a regular class but a supplementary activity. If the tests show that he is below a certain standard with respect to college students the country over, he is placed in English 1a. (Categories tested include usage, sentence-structure, punctuation, spelling, vocabulary, speed and comprehension of reading, and general scholastic aptitude.) If the tests place him above a certain standard he is placed in English 1. If they place him in one of the top five percentiles of the students entering K.U. he will be given the opportunity to skip English 1 (after an essay test) and begin his college work with English 2.

Reasons for Placement

Our emphasis on individual variations and individual needs explains why these three paths—English 1a, English 1, English 2—are provided. The student who is placed in English 1a needs to do more work than the others, and needs to have more individual help, if he is to achieve a level of skill that will enable him to do college work satisfactorily. It is no favor to a person still having elementary troubles with expression to put him with a group more advanced and expect him to keep up. Yet we believe that the careful and intensive training of English 1a brings him in one semester, if he passes the course, to a level at which he can go on to English 2 with good promise of success.

Courses a Student Takes

The only really important difference between English 1a and English 1 is that a student gets more than twice the individual attention in English 1a than his somewhat more advanced fellow student gets in English 1. The same texts are used in both courses, both courses keep abreast of each other at all times, both give three credits, and at the end of the semester students who pass either course go directly to English 2.

English 1a

The extra individual attention of English 1a is supplied to the student by several means. First, he spends a total of six hours in class each week as against three hours in English 1. Two of the additional three hours, however, are occupied by a "laboratory" session once a week. (This session should be regarded more as "outside" time than as "classroom" time—since college classroom time ordinarily implies two hours of outside study for each hour in class.) In this period the student writes at a desk of his own in a special room. He is under the supervision of the instructor, who moves quietly around the class answering questions and giving suggestions. Dictionaries and other reference books are provided, and, when necessary, papers can be projected on a screen for the attention of the whole class. Also, the student in English 1a does a series of exercises in reading and writing, using a manual, *Write Now*, prepared by members of our staff.

To make it possible for the teacher to spend more than the usual amount of time on the work and problems of the individual student, we limit the sections of English 1a to fifteen students—five fewer than English 1, and considerably fewer than similar courses in most universities. In this way the instructor is able to have frequent personal conferences with each of his students, and he also has time to do a thorough job of correcting themes.

Students do a great deal of writing in English 1a. We are strongly of the opinion that many of the difficulties which gave them low scores on the placement tests are the result of their having had too little practice in writing before college. In a semester's time each student writes 38 separate compositions totalling about 13,000 words. Each paper is carefully read and criticized by the teacher, and then returned to the writer for correction and revision.

Shifts in Placement

We recognize that no placement test is completely accurate. Sometimes a student is nervous or tired when he takes the test, and does not do himself justice. Therefore instructors in English 1a submit to a special committee the papers of any student they feel has been incorrectly placed. The committee reviews the papers, and authorizes transfer to English 1 for those students whose papers indicate that they can do without the extra help provided by English 1a. This may be done at any time in the semester up to the ninth week. In this way those students—there are always a few—who improve rapidly after the course is under way have the opportunity to transfer to English 1. At his own option a student who has been recommended for transfer to English 1 may remain in English 1a. Despite the additional time required by English 1a, each semester about half of those who could leave if they wished to do so elect to remain in English 1a because they want the extra help and attention it provides.

English 1

As we have said, English 1 covers, in fewer hours per week, the same ground as English 1a, except for the material in the laboratory manual. In both courses, we have one aim: to help the student learn to organize his ideas clearly and express them correctly, in the language actually used by educated Americans in the mid-twentieth century. We believe that "good" English is much more than

simply "correct" English. It should of course be correct in conforming to the usage of educated people writing and speaking now, but to be good it must take into account the nature of the subject and the audience.

Incidentally, we believe there is no place for the wholly artificial rules that are sometimes laid down by teachers who attempt to force their students to observe niceties that are not commonly observed in actual practice. To write good English, first of all a writer must have something to say. An empty paper is as bad as no paper—perhaps worse. When a student writes he must consider what he is saying, what his relation to it is, and to whom he is saying it—and he must adapt what he says and the way he says it to these conditions. If a boy writes of some familiar personal experience such as a fishing trip and uses the heavily formal style of an encyclopedia (or, more likely, his pencil-chewing imitation of it) he is not using good English. The commas may be in the right places, "receive" and "believe" may be spelled correctly, no participles may be dangling—and yet if his style and matter are inappropriate to himself and to the audience (his classmates) his writing is not "good." Nor is it "good" if a serious subject such as his religion is treated in a breezy, slangy style.

We are talking here, of course, about rhetoric. It teaches the art of making correct writing good writing—that is, writing that gains the willing and sympathetic interest of the reader, holds his attention, and wins his support. As for correctness in writing—spelling, punctuation, grammar, and so on—it remains of great importance, though we believe it should not be taught as an end in itself. *What* is said is the really important thing; how it is said should contribute to its effectiveness. We try to show the student that a comma-splice, a fused sentence, a pronoun with an uncertain reference, are errors to avoid because they will muddle the sense of what he is saying. Some errors do not, of course, wholly obscure the writer's intent, but they draw the wrong sort of attention to themselves, so that the writer loses sympathetic contact with his reader. We want the student to realize that what he says has a purpose: communicating his ideas, feelings, and experiences to other people.

These are the things we try to drive home in English 1 and 1a. A student in English 1 writes less than a student in English 1a, yet he writes 23 themes, ranging in length from 150 words to 1500 words. His semester's output amounts to at least 8500 words. All of it is carefully corrected, revised, and checked again. Classes are limited to twenty members, so that the instructor has time for conferences and for special aid to particular students.

The textbooks for English 1 and 1a include a handbook of grammar and rhetoric, a reader of non-fiction selections, a modern American novel, and a college dictionary. The student in English 1a uses in addition the laboratory manual mentioned above, which is made up of selections for reading, and exercises for writing based on the reading. The college reader used in both courses supplies ideas for compositions, and furnishes examples showing how professional writers have solved problems of organization and expression. The novel, which is studied in the last part of the semester, provides a transition to English 2.

English 2, 3, and 4

In English 1 and 1a the emphasis is strongly upon composition. In English 2, 3, and 4, training in composition continues largely through correction and comment on the papers the student writes. The subject-matter of these courses is

literature, however: American literature in English 2, four great works of English literature in English 3, and the Bible and Greek epic and tragedy in English 4. For students who have done superior work in the earlier courses, there are special honor-selections of English 2, 3, and 4. In these sections the student who can dig deeper into the reading and aim higher in his writing is challenged to do so by work at a somewhat higher level than is possible in the regular sections of these courses. The student who has a sufficiently high average in English 1 and 2 may, if he wishes, omit English 3 and 4 and proceed to English 12 and 14, a two-semester survey of the history of English literature..

Writing in English 2, 3, and 4

The writing in English 2, 3, and 4 rises from the works of literature that are studied. Throughout these courses the student must maintain a decent level in the mechanics of composition—he cannot pass any of these courses unless his writing remains habitually free of those gross errors in mechanics which he presumably learned not to make in English 1 and 1a. In addition, he is expected to show by what he writes that he is developing in literary insight and elementary critical ability. In English 2 he turns in ten papers, ranging from 350-word compositions written in a fifty-minute class period to a 750-word theme written outside.

In English 3 and 4, which meet only two hours a week during the sophomore year, he writes at least four 350-word themes in class, and one theme of 1000 words and another of 2000 words outside class. As in English 1 and 1a, all compositions are closely read by the instructor, revised or rewritten by the student, and again checked to see if they are acceptable. Classes in English 3 and 4 average from 22 to 25 students, and the practice of personal conferences with the student is continued.

Aims of the Program in Composition and Literature

The freshman and sophomore program in composition and literature accounts for by far the largest block of enrollments in English and requires by far the largest amount of work of the staff. This work touches every student who enrolls in the University. We think that it is our responsibility to help the student refine his use of language so that he can read and write suitably in one of the higher kinds of occupation and take a position of some influence in a democratic society. No less important is the responsibility of bringing him into the presence of great works of literature and the great minds who created them—in order to help him discover an important part of his heritage.

Teaching Staff for Freshman and Sophomore Courses

Because of our conviction that the freshman and sophomore courses are in many ways our most important courses, we ask every member of the Department, regardless of rank, to teach in this program. We do not consider it something to be given to junior instructors exclusively, but an opportunity for all of us to do significant work in an area in which we can accomplish much good. Like most universities with graduate programs we employ as instructors a number of people who are candidates for advanced degrees in English. Most of these already hold the master's degree, and many have had several years of teaching

experience before coming to us—some as many as a dozen years, usually in high school and college.

To coordinate teaching efforts and to give help and guidance to the less experienced teachers, the director of the program in composition and literature visits classes, makes checks on the marking and grading of the students' papers, and has frequent conferences with members of the staff. Meetings of the entire staff are held from time to time in order to keep grading and marking regular. Besides making these efforts to secure first-rate, coordinated instruction, we are offering this year for the first time a graduate course in the teaching of college English. It is aimed at making the graduate students excellent teachers of English, especially in the composition and literature that are appropriate to the freshman and sophomore years. Those who go on to a Ph.D. in English of course become qualified also to teach junior, senior, and graduate students.

The English Proficiency Examination

Besides the courses a student takes, there is another sort of educational effort in English. It is provided by the English Proficiency Examination. Students in most of the schools of the University of Kansas are required to pass this examination as a requisite for graduation. A student takes it in his junior or senior year.

Every teacher of English knows how long it takes to get students established in good habits of writing. We all know that the job cannot be done in English classes alone, and we feel strongly that the responsibility for good writing rests not only on the English instructor but on every other instructor, no matter what the department. Sometimes students who do passing work or even better than passing work in English classes manage to get by with sloppy writing in other classes. Because of the trend in present-day education toward so-called objective tests—very useful for placement but often quite inferior for educative purposes—students in some fields may do relatively little writing after they finish English 4. The result for the student is likely to be the erroneous and perilous conclusion that good writing is demanded only in English classes. It's a sad day, after graduation, when he finds out in the office or on the job how wrong he was.

The English Proficiency Examination was set up in 1938 by the faculty of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. In recent years various of the schools that make up the University have found it desirable to check their students' English before graduation by requiring them to pass the English Proficiency Examination. The purposes of the examination are (1) to keep students writing-minded after they finish the required courses in English, and (2) to give them one more opportunity to find out whether they are likely to be handicapped by poor written English after they leave the University, and to help them to remove their difficulties, if they have any, before it is too late. This examination is now a requirement for graduation in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the School of Education, the School of Journalism, the School of Fine Arts, and the Department of Nursing (an undergraduate department of the School of Medicine).

Requirements of the Proficiency Examination

The English Proficiency Examination calls for good plain everyday expository English—nothing necessarily "literary", nothing elaborate. The form of the examination is quite simple: the student is given a list of thirty or more topics ranging

from such as "What Characteristics Should a President of the United States Have?" to "What Shall We Do About College Sports?" or "My Grandmother: A Remarkable Person." From this list he chooses topics as directed, and writes for three hours.

No one goes into this examination without knowing what he is in for. When he registers for it in the dean's office, he is given a copy of the English Proficiency pamphlet which contains specimens of superior, average, and failing papers, and a sample set of examination topics. He is told specifically what is expected of him:

> As juniors and seniors, you should have something to say which is worth listening to. A paper which says nothing, which is illogical and incoherent, cannot be considered a good paper even if it is faultless in grammar, punctuation, and spelling . . . . You should be able to arrange your thoughts into paragraphs and sentences which hang together and make sense . . . . You should be able to write with a minimum of error in grammar . . . . Your punctuation should be intelligent and consistent even if it does not always follow textbook rule . . . . If you do not know when to write *its* and when to write *it's*, dust off your handbook and get busy . . . . Errors in the use of *to* and *too* and *there* and *their* are not solely spelling errors, but may be mentioned here as an example of what to be careful about.

Although the English Proficiency Examination is not primarily an English Department project, members of the English faculty read and grade the papers. The committee in charge, which is made up of representatives of the English department and of other departments as well, tries in every way possible to be helpful, believing that if the examination is not constructive, it is meaningless, perhaps even harmful. Students are therefore invited to come in to have their writing checked and diagnosed before they take the examination. If they fail, they are urgently requested to come in for conferences on their papers and for further help. If they fail twice, they must enroll in another course in composition and try once more—or as often as need be.

Most of our students accept the English Proficiency Examination in the spirit which originated it. Of course there are always a few who believe that we require it only because we enjoy giving examinations to hundreds of students and grading hundreds of papers (all in addition to our daily classes and daily paper-reading). On the whole they are a reasonable lot of young people, however—and practical, too. They know about the merciless competition in the world outside the university, and they have no wish to enter it with a handicap. They want to write not just adequately, but well. The English Proficiency Examination, we believe, is one way to help them.

Training Future Teachers of English

The Department of English and the School of Education cooperate in training those students who want to become teachers of English. For prospective high-school teachers there are two programs in the School of Education, the Language Arts Major and the English-Education Program. For teachers of college English there is a program administered by the Department of English.

The Language Arts Major

Most students who will teach English in junior and senior high schools enroll as Language Arts Majors in the School of Education. This program recognizes the need of the teacher to be prepared in speech (by courses in the Department of Speech and Drama) as well as in English. A student preparing to teach English in the public schools must complete at least three courses in speech. He thus gets some preparation useful in such activities as play-production and debate.

The bulk of the work in the Language Arts major is in English. A student takes at least thirteen semester-hours in courses in which composition is stressed: freshman and sophomore English and a three-hour course in intermediate composition. He takes at least fifteen hours in courses in which literature is stressed: two basic survey courses in Englsh literature, two in American literature, and one in Shakespeare. Usually his program permits him to enroll in one or two additional junior-senior courses in literature.

In addition he completes a course in methods of teaching the language arts, and following that he is assigned during his senior year to a junior or senior high school where he teaches and observes classes in English for seven weeks. He works with regular classroom teachers and is supervised by a member of the staff of the School of Education.

The English-Education Program

Graduate training for teachers of high-school and junior college English is provided in the English-Education Program of the School of Education. A student in this program takes those courses in English and in methods of teaching which will best prepare him for a specialty. Under this program, three graduate degrees are offered: The Master of Science in Education (30 hours of work), the degree of Specialist in Education (sixty hours), and the degree of Doctor of Education or Ph.D. in Education (ninety hours). A thesis is required for each of these degrees, with thesis-credit allowed toward the total semester-hours required. The thesis is usually a study of some aspect of teaching the language arts, and it may be made in the school in which the candidate is teaching. Candidates who complete the Master's degree under this program are most frequently employed as teachers in large city high schools or junior colleges, or as supervisors. Those who complete the Specialist's degree or one of the Doctor's degrees are usually employed by colleges specializing in the training of teachers.

The English Department Program for Teachers of College English

Graduate degrees in English lead chiefly to teaching. The Ph.D. in English leads almost exclusively to teaching, and the M.A. usually does. Most of the graduate students in English at the University of Kansas are already teachers of English, since most are teaching here in the freshman and sophomore courses. Many of these come to us with considerable experience, either in a high school or college. Part of their training as teachers is accomplished through their work as teachers in full charge of classes but under the supervision of a regular member of the staff. In addition, a graduate seminar in the teaching of college English is offered. It is required of those who are graduate students employed as instructors, and a number of those who are not so employed also take it.

In this seminar the student approaches the teaching of composition through the study of rhetoric—broadly defined as the art of communication by language. He is encouraged to see the act of writing, whether of themes, business letters, stories, or other forms, as a complex process that focuses at the fingertips the total personality of the writer. Writing is a significant social act that has relevance only if the presence of a reader is kept constantly in mind. The student therefore learns something of such diverse fields as classical rhetorical theory, linguistics, the psychology of personality, semantics, and logic—all for the specific purpose of developing a fundamental approach to writing.

He learns to determine points of grammar and usage by going direct to the great works on the English language by scholars like Jespersen, Curme, Kruisinga, and Poutsma. In addition he makes a study of textbooks of rhetoric and composition, and learns to evaluate them. He studies composition programs in other colleges, from the traditional freshman English to the experimental "basic communications". He studies prose style, the media of communication, propaganda, reading, and "readability". Through these studies he gains a rounded view of writing and its consequences in our civilization.

We expect this seminar to accomplish two aims: first, to help the young college teacher form a more accurate estimate of his subject and a sharper and more informed awareness of his own attitude toward it, and second, to provide for him an informal and friendly workshop-atmosphere in which he can get advice and criticism and compare his methods with those of others.

Cooperation on Common Problems

The program outlined above is a going program; nevertheless we know well that it can be improved both in theory and in execution. We certainly do not feel that we know all the answers, and we have no thought of imposing our views on others. Rather, we seek to cultivate an attitude of informed probing and questioning, an attitude that welcomes comments and criticisms from high-school teachers, principals, and superintendents, and from other departments in the University. They can help us, and we can help them.

We especially want to know in what ways we can be of further service to English instructors and programs. We want to know those things which will help all teachers of English to create to the fullest degree those magic and glowing moments when a student learns something.

Preparing Students for College English

The commonest question that comes to us is this: "What does college English require, and how can I prepare my students for it?" In answer to this question we have sent to many, and will be glad to send to more, copies of our pamphlet, *Instructions for Students in English 1 and 1a.* It gives in detail our basic requirements of good grammar, punctuation, spelling, and organization; it describes the standards of grading we use; and it makes a detailed explanation of honesty in written work. A careful reading of it will reveal what we do and will suggest what may be done in high school.

Often teachers want to know how they can prepare students for the placement examination. Our answer is that preparation specifically for the examination is neither feasible nor desirable. Rather, the student should be taught to write clear and correct English habitually. He will have no trouble with the examination if he can express his ideas simply and clearly, and without gross errors.

Emphasis on Practice in Writing

By all odds the best preparation for writing well is practice in writing. We believe that writing must be taught directly, through specific assignments, and that it cannot be taught well indirectly or theoretically. This means that each time a student writes a paper, has it corrected, and is made to understand how he could have written it better, he has learned something he can't learn so quickly or so well in any other way.

The task of the teacher is clear: the burden of correcting hundreds of papers must be undertaken. But we know that teachers who are overworked cannot undertake it. If results in the shape of good writing are to be produced, the effort needed to produce these results must be expended on the individual training of each student. Therefore we want to underline strongly our position that high schools should recognize the inevitable practicalities of the situation by reducing where necessary the load of the individual teacher. As an attainable ideal we suggest a load of about 80 students, in four classes of about 20, for each full-time English teacher (and proportionate loads for those who teach English part time.)

We feel that the careful correction of each student's written work is one of the most important parts of the teacher's task. Therefore time should be specifically allotted in the teacher's schedule for this purpose. Everyone would benefit from this arrangement. Large classes and heavy classroom schedules simply do not permit teachers to give students the practice in writing necessary to produce good written work and establish good writing as a habit. We may be biased by our professional concern, but we can think of no more productive and far-reaching application of effort in high-school teaching. Democracy is founded on the assumption, among others, that we must have educated citizens to insure that democratic government functions properly. In educating those citizens, we believe that English is basic.

Relativism

Ernest E. Bayles
School of Education, University of Kansas

In light of thought patterns of the twentieth century, it is likely that many will think of a paper on Relativism as little more than disquisition on the obvious. And in so thinking, I am convinced that they would be correct. According to Webster, disquisition means study, and, in light of experience and experiment, that we ordinarily and necessarily view life and deal with life relativistically is almost if not quite obvious. However, a study of something which, at first glance or with merely cursory perusal, seems obvious is not without likelihood of being, on occasions at least, a fruitful occupation. Since the obvious is obvious, it does not provoke reflection without special effort and, unless occasionally subjected to reflection or critical study, significant implications may be missed in the hustle and bustle of everyday affairs. Hence no apologies are offered for the chosen topic.